

Strengthening a New Association of Municipalities

Czech Republic

Background

Across Central and Eastern Europe, local governments are assuming greater responsibility for the quality of public services and facilities. In the Czech Republic this process is well advanced and is formalized in the Law on Municipalities. Because municipalities were being asked to assume new and sometimes difficult roles and responsibilities, the Union of Towns and Communities of the Czech Republic (UTC) was established in January 1990 as a new voluntary, nongovernmental organization of municipalities. By the end of 1991 the membership had reached 1,100 out of 6,400 municipalities, representing 70 percent of the country's population of 10 million. In early 1992, however, nearly 600 members resigned because of UTC's lack of leadership due to political changes; lack of experience; inadequate organizational, management, communication (lobbying) skills; and lack of technical capacity to provide effective member services. To counteract these problems, the UTC set itself four goals: to become an important partner representing local government to the central government; to strengthen the economic independence of municipalities; to influence legislation relating to decentralization; and to provide necessary services to municipalities.

Innovation

In 1993, the UTC began work in the following areas:

- Staff capacity and level of experience: Two UTC staff members participated in an Eastern European regional conference and in a study tour of U.S. associations.
- Information processing capacity: UTC purchased computers, software, a laser printer, and fax equipment.
- Membership development and publications: UTC received consultant advice on methods of increasing member involvement in policy-making, promoting membership and improving member communications. UTC evaluated a variety of communications means, including publications, press releases, and training materials and began publishing a regular monthly newsletter.
- Event management: UTC received training in conference planning methods and program development, session management, and social activity planning. UTC has been successful in organizing its annual assemblies and participating in municipal services exhibitions.
- Public policy: UTC learned about methods that U.S. cities and counties use to influence legislation as well as methods used to bring about policy consensus.
- Local government operations: UTC reviewed management methods and creative financing techniques used in U.S. municipalities to achieve desired public policy results. The UTC participated in establishing an NGO, the Fund for Assistance to Local Administration. The Fund's principal objective is to provide training and consultation to local authorities through its 12 regional training and management centers.

Results

By June 1993, the membership of UTC had increased to 1,123 and is now stable at 1,387, despite fees that have increased from Kc 1 to Kc 1.30 per inhabitant. UTC has increased its capacity to lobby, review legislative proposals, and negotiate with ministries, and the government has recognized UTC's role in submitting proposals leading to the fiscal decentralization of local and regional governments. UTC has established numerous international relationships fostered by regional meetings and on-the-job training of UTC staff. UTC has begun to provide specific training assistance to local governments.

Summary

To counteract problems that had led to a decrease in membership, the UTC began work to improve its staff and information processing capacity, membership development and publications, event management, and efforts to influence public policy. By June 1993, the membership of UTC had increased to 1,123 and is now stable at 1,387, and UTC has become an important partner representing local government to the central government.

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